

How an Outcomes-Based Curriculum Enables Authentic Assessment

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Finger Lakes Community College (FLCC), established in 1965, is a medium-sized community college located midway between Syracuse and Buffalo in the heart of upstate New York. FLCC has a four-county service area that is mostly rural, but includes two small urban centers. FLCC is one of 31 community colleges in the State University of New York (SUNY) system, which also includes 34 additional institutions of higher learning. FLCC's enrollment is approximately 6,500 students annually, made up of approximately 30% transfer students, 20% terminal degree-seeking students, 40% dually-enrolled high school students, and 10% in certificate programs or non-matriculated.

For the past three and a half years, FLCC faculty and staff have been engaged in a governance-led comprehensive reform initiative, which we call the [Learning Framework](#). The Framework moves our curriculum to a wholly outcomes-based set of local requirements that privilege our own institutional learning outcomes, which we call the FLCC values, while also including our state and regional accreditation requirements for General Education. Additionally, the reform initiative formally adopts the outcomes as guidelines for co-curricular activities and mandates the inclusion of First-Year Experience outcomes and Capstone outcomes in every program.

The Learning Framework represents the largest curricular and assessment reform in the College's 50-year history. **In this piece, we posit broadly that large-scale outcomes-based reform, tied to the local values of the institution, allows for wider stakeholder participation, creates curricular flexibility and engenders an authentic assessment process.** In order to demonstrate this point, we detail the creation and implementation processes that we have used at FLCC in pursuit of the Learning Framework.

CREATING THE FRAMEWORK

External Curricular and Assessment Pressure

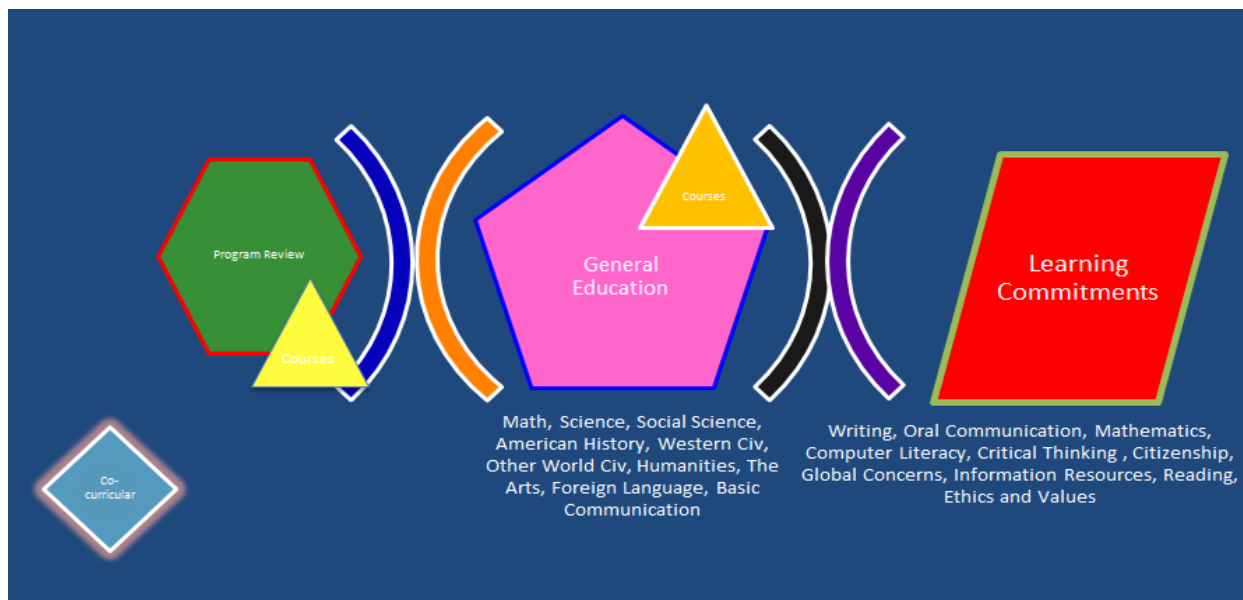
In June 2013, the SUNY system adopted a policy known broadly as "[Seamless Transfer](#)" that contained a number of mandates for the curricular make-up of all degree programs in order to allow students to seamlessly transfer within the SUNY system. To ensure inclusion of courses for both general education and for program requirements, we had to reduce all of our associate's degrees to no more than 64 credit hours. Through this process, we found that 91% of our programs were out of compliance with some aspect of the mandate, some extremely so, requiring

us to make a large number of curricular changes in a short time. In particular, most of our programs had to remove required courses both to meet the 64 credit limit and to make room for the additional mandated coursework. For many educators at FLCC this combination felt like a dramatic loss of control over the curriculum.

At the same time, the College received a series of recommendations from our 10-year accreditation process, many of which broadly asked us to better articulate the wide-variety of learning outcomes and consequently communicate them more effectively to our students. Furthermore, our regional accreditor, Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) released a draft of a new set of standards, containing additional requirements to incorporate into our general education curriculum. Many educators at FLCC were left to ask: where, in this sea of the SUNY system and Middle States, do we still see FLCC?

Internal Inefficiencies

FLCC has a long history of academic assessment, although, we, like many schools received recommendations to improve our assessment of student learning from our regional accreditor. In reality though we had multiple sets of outcomes— local, SUNY, and regional accreditor specific outcomes— but none of them mapped to each other in any significant way. Consequently, we had three different areas of assessment all of which required different processes to create, assess and report. As discussion began about the need for a new way forward holistically, the co-leaders of the initiative (and authors of this paper) created this graphic to explain the current assessment system.

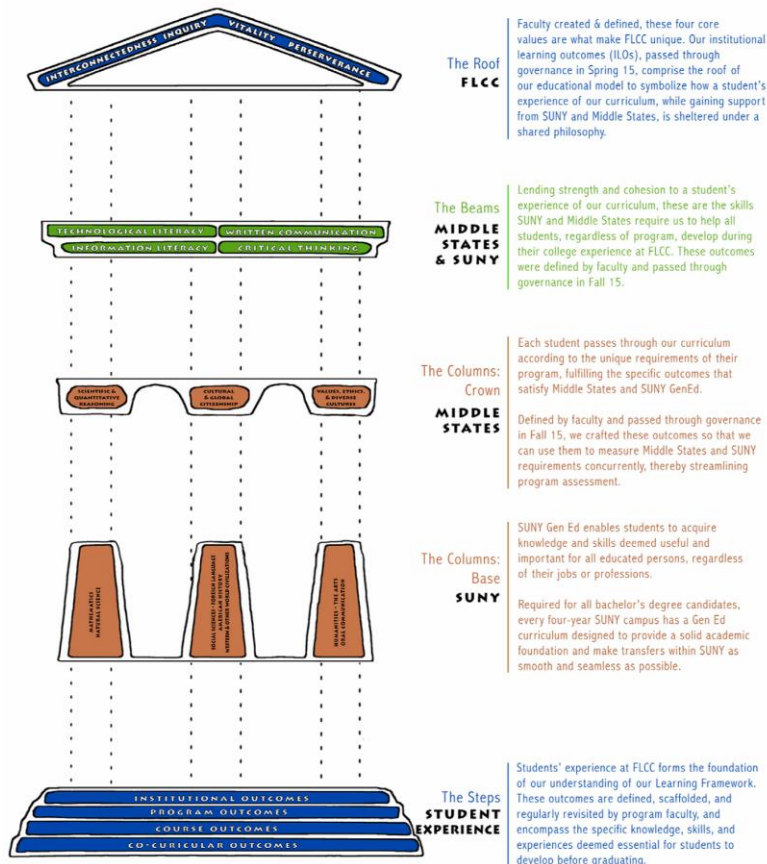


If this graphic hurts your eyes, it accomplished its goal. Taking on large scale reform is not an easy task and should not be undertaken lightly. This graphic was meant to demonstrate that despite our well-intentioned path to assessment, opportunities for improving teaching and learning were lost in complex and departmentalized processes that promoted assessment and then more assessment, **but not good, sustained and systematic conversations about teaching and learning.**

The Learning Framework

The graphic above helped demonstrate that we needed new and more comprehensive blueprints. The resulting plan, went through many stages of drafting and re-drafting ([link to graphic organizer](#)). It lost a column, gained stairs, and added other features as we worked to represent and assess the uniqueness of an FLCC education.

Graphic Organizer of the Learning Framework



To summarize the key features of our new Learning Framework:

- Subsumes everything under FLCC values which are both Institutional Learning Outcomes (ILO) and conceptually serve as values for the college
- Fully outcomes-based
- Meets external requirements, but privileges outcomes we have defined locally
- Serves as outcomes for both curricular and co-curricular efforts

For more information on the Framework, including all of our outcome language see: https://ep.chalkandwire.com/ep2_flcc/SecureUrlPage.aspx?urlId=3568&u=guest&cus=385.

BENEFITS OF THE FRAMEWORK

The most direct benefit to this model is the opportunity for educators at FLCC to define and defend their curriculum while still meeting external requirements. There are some key ways that this manifested in the reform initiative. Initially, it allowed us to shift conversations, at a time of high tension because requirements were changing, to focus on the higher ideals of education by asking the educators at FLCC “What makes us unique?” The rhetoric of a reform initiative focused on what is special about an FLCC education recasts assessment as a tool for good, rather than a bureaucratic act tied to checking boxes and meeting deadlines. Further, this “unique FLCC” approach quickly allowed us to broaden the conversation quite dramatically to include the whole campus community. Governance representatives from the registrar’s office, advising, student affairs, the Library and others were intentionally represented in the conversation. Service departments, like Marketing and Human Resources, accessed the higher-level discussion of our values to consider in their work. There was a much stronger push to have a set of values for FLCC that transcended the traditional general education outcomes – to indicate what we valued that set us apart from other colleges. Focusing on a larger discussion of what we, as a campus, value brought in more people to the conversation while still allowing the policy and procedure changes necessary for curriculum and assessment to function, to continue.

However, beyond this initial ability to saliently connect the FLCC experience to include a greater breadth of educators in the creation process, there are some important benefits in the long-term because an outcomes based approach, like this, creates curricular flexibility and supports authentic assessment. Distribution models, commonly used in the design of General Education programs, forces educators to think in boxes. In verifying student completion, we check the box: “ 1 computer science credit”. Even pseudo outcomes-based approaches do this: “complete technological literacy outcome by taking 1 approved course in computer science”. An outcomes approach that describes what is meant by technological literacy not only gives a good understanding of what we want the students to learn, but also naturally sets up the assessment process to inform us on the student’s progress in meeting those outcomes. Further, this approach also helps us overcome curricular restraints in that an outcome is more portable because it can be incorporated into a wider range of courses or even into co-curricular activities. While any approach to curriculum will inevitably look at the course level, the benefit to a fully outcomes-based approach is the ability to think about the wide variety of learning that exists. In other words, when the learning outcome is the primary vehicle by which the curriculum is built, the assessment of that outcome tells the story of that learning. As we moved toward implementation, this change in the way we as educators were beginning to think about the relationship between curriculum building with outcomes and student learning was at the forefront of our minds.

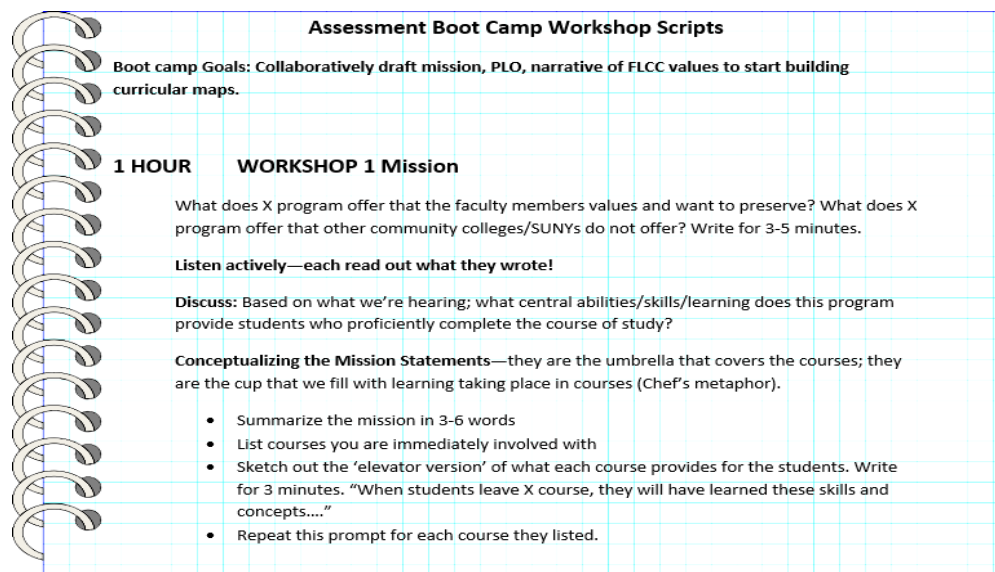
IMPLEMENTING THE FRAMEWORK

We did employ a number of key strategies that helped us build the Framework at FLCC, but, as with many reform initiatives the ideas and planning are easier than implementation. Moving to an outcomes-based model and one which aligns to institutional values that are a bit far afield from more typical institution-levels outcomes, such as critical thinking or written communication (worthy outcomes, for sure and still in our framework, but not the higher ideal values we wanted to define the unique nature of an FLCC education), required a new way of thinking about curriculum and assessment.

Acknowledging this newness, we deliberately designed a highly collaborative and supportive implementation process. This implementation process was meant to reflect the shared nature of the Framework and to support faculty to think more deeply about the outcomes they were ascribing to their programs, to their courses, and to FLCC itself. Referred to broadly as the coaching model, we designed a 3-prong approach that marries instruction, technology, and documentation with the goal of maximizing flexibility, improving the integrity of our curricular and assessment process, and make real (or authentically implement) our new commitment to FLCC values. We outline each of these pieces below.

1. *An assessment coaching model which privileges narrative over checking boxes*

At the heart of this model is the use of assessment coaches in an inquiry-based approach. Coaches ask questions, such as “What are the pieces of your program that are most critical to you?” that help faculty develop their program narrative.



From here, program- and course-level outcomes are created, but it stems from the program narrative created through this inquiry-based, narrative-driven approach.

2. *An ePortfolio approach to alignment so that the technology itself mirrors an ongoing and iterative process*

We use an assessment platform with ePortfolio capabilities. This makes it easy to drop student artifacts and assessment results into the portfolio as they come in in preparation for norming and “closing the loop” conversations. However, special software is not necessary. There are a couple of main reasons we use portfolios with students: 1) it allows programs or courses to have all their work in one space; and 2) it allows students to reflect on the different pieces of the puzzle in an iterative process. Faculty can flip up and down through the different pieces of the portfolio and it can be added to over time. It also has the benefit of producing a finished product that can be shared with others easily.

3. *A documentation process that reflects both mapping in traditional sense and narrative approach that we have taken instructionally.*

Assignments	Course	CLOs Assessed	POs Assessed	ILOs Assessed
Key Assessment # 1				
Assignment Name				
Development of a Client-Specific Exercise Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> HPE 270 Fitness Assessment and Program Design 	✓ 1 ✓ 2 ✓ 3 ✓ 4	✓ 1 ✓ 2 ✓ 3 ✓ 4	✓ Inquiry ✓ Interconnectedness ✓ Perseverance ✓ Vitality
Assignment Detail				
The key assessment in this course is also the capstone project for the AS Sports Medicine degree. Students will work with “clients” to evaluate their current levels of fitness and wellness through a pre-exercise medical history and fitness evaluation. Students will then interpret the results to design a client-specific exercise plan that can be implemented. Students will also monitor client progress in order to make appropriate modifications to the plan.				
Values Assessment				
Inquiry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students will complete a thorough, detailed pre-exercise screening in order to identify any risk factors that would contraindicate some or all forms of exercise for a client. After the screening, students then need to be able to monitor a client’s progress to identify if changes to the plan need to be made. 			
Interconnectedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students must integrate concepts of anatomy, physiology, kinesiology, and biomechanics, along with overall wellness, in order to successfully help clients of all abilities navigate and participate in an exercise/fitness program. 			
Perseverance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The assignment is designed to have students take a client from the Pre-program stage all the way through the maintenance of physical activity, imparting the value of physical activity throughout an individual’s entire lifespan. 			
Vitality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individual actions, such as participation in an exercise training program, impact both an individual’s physical fitness and overall wellness. Sports medicine practitioners need to be able to analyze an individual’s current fitness level and current willingness to make a behavior change in order to implement appropriate fitness and exercise activities. 			

In the example above, the emphasis is on representing the learning story that happens with this artifact and how it relates to the program and institution. While there are appropriately written course-level outcomes and program-level outcomes that led to the creation of this key assessment map, we don’t get lost in the measurement. Together with the instructional approach embodied by the faculty assessment coach and the use of an iterative portfolio process, this documentation reinforces the commitment that the Learning Framework makes to focus on telling the unique story of teaching and learning at FLCC.

WHAT’S NEXT FOR FLCC

As we prepare for Fall 2017, we are beginning to polish many of the pieces of the coaching model including our portfolio approach and the documentation therein as we work through implementation. With one more year of intense alignment left, we are moving toward applying the inquiry-based, narrative approach to norming and closing-the-loop on a larger scale than we have been able to thus far. As programs start collecting artifacts and recording what is found through assessing them, we plan to connect the narratives both about process and assessment findings to the program portfolio. There is no doubt that this is a fundamental change from previous program review and assessment. We won’t have, what in our case were fairly meaningless measures outcomes, in which 95% or more of students always seems to achieve the benchmark. But we will be working toward asking and answering key questions about the outcomes in our Learning Framework. We expect the coaching model to continue to help make these messy and complicated conversations meaningfully recorded and actionable.

We acknowledge that this is a different road for curriculum and assessment processes and both in terms of scope and departure from traditionally held notions of what makes good assessment, it may make assessment professionals uneasy. In her recent article in *Assessment Update*, Natasha Jankowski challenges assessment professionals to explore the epistemological questions that underscore our work. She writes: “What does it mean to say a student knows or fails to demonstrate that they know something? What counts as learning? How do we know students have learned?” (2017, p. 10). These are complex questions which require complex answers.

Academic assessment has always held the promise of reform, but often it stops short, falling back on the forms, the boxes and the bureaucracy of a process. Moving to a fully outcomes-based curriculum (and co-curriculum) that relies on an inquiry-driven and narrative-based way of documenting the assessment of the outcomes recasts assessment, moving away from reduction in order to answer complex questions about teaching and learning. For us, as a direct result of connecting the reform to higher ideals and involving the whole campus, the Learning Framework reinforces the concept that learning happens everywhere at FLCC and that beyond the measurement of student learning within courses there must be a sustained conversation about student learning by all members of the community.

References

Jankowski, N. A. (2017). Moving Toward a Philosophy of Assessment. *Assessment Update*, 29: 10–11. doi:10.1002/au.30096

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